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SUBJECT: SERBIA: PM PDAS COUNTRYMAN DISCUSSES SECURITY AND DEFENSE ISSUES

Summary

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**¶1.** (SBU) PDAS Thomas Countryman's July 8 visit was the first high-level visit following Vice President Biden's May visit to Belgrade. Though initial plans were for two meetings, the one day visit morphed into four ministerial level meetings, a TV interview in Serbian, and a small reception with NGOs and think tanks. It appears that Serbia's leaders were anxious to learn from PDAS Countryman if the overall U.S. agenda for Serbia had changed since the Biden visit.

The results of each meeting showed the importance of the Biden visit and the yearning for additional visitors, as well as Serbian leaders testing the waters for potential U.S visits. End summary.

**¶2.** (U) Tom Countryman, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, met in Belgrade on July 8 with Minister of Interior Ivica Dacic, State Secretary of the Ministry of Defense Dusan Spasojevic, Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Jovan Ratkovic, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, and representatives of the MFA's NATO Directorate and NGOs dealing with security and defense issues.

Serbia's Relations with NATO

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**¶3.** (SBU) PDAS Countryman encouraged Serbia to appoint an ambassador and open a NATO mission as soon as possible, in order to demonstrate its open-mindedness toward cooperation with the Alliance. FM Jeremic asserted that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was eager to open the office, and in fact already had someone on the payroll to run it, but was facing delays from the security establishment. When questioned on the nature of the delay, Jeremic said that Serbia's Security Council had not yet issued the certificates required for full accreditation. He claimed he had pushed Minister of Defense Dragan Sutanovac to move on the issue earlier that day. Jeremic told Countryman that Serbia had "no illusions regarding our ultimate destination - geography is a powerful thing." He added that the same held true for small states like Georgia, which was slow to understand its own geopolitical reality.

**¶4.** (SBU) Countryman heard a very different version of the situation from the Ministry of Defense. Spasojevic said that the MOD had decided not to wait any longer for the MFA to appoint an ambassador, but rather would appoint its own Special Envoy - likely a general - to run an office of five people. Countryman and the Charge cautioned Spasojevic that such an approach might hinder rather than help Serbia's relations with NATO by sending a confusing message. Spasojevic reaffirmed MOD's desire to cooperate with NATO, saying that neutrality was not what Serbia needed. The Charge emphasized that Serbia's leadership needed to do the hard job of speaking more openly to the public about the costs and benefits of eventual NATO membership.

¶ 15. (SBU) Addressing the issue of defense cooperation more broadly, Spasojevic told Countryman that Serbia wanted full membership in the Southeast Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM). Countryman said that he would take this message back to Washington; both capitals should focus on a practical solution that does not view membership in a "reward/punishment" or "concession/favor" framework. Spasojevic stressed that Serbia should not be "punished" now for what it may or may not do in five years when Kosovo would be ready for membership.

¶ 16. (SBU) Presidential Advisor Ratkovic provided yet a third version of the NATO office status. He claimed that the GOS was ready "any day" to confirm an Ambassador, most likely the current special envoy, and there were no further obstacles to opening the office.

#### Security Cooperation/Afghanistan

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¶ 17. (SBU) PDAS Countryman explained to his interlocutors that "getting Afghanistan right" was the Obama administration's top foreign policy priority and asked whether Serbia was prepared to make a security contribution to ISAF, perhaps under the auspices of another country. MOI Minister Dacic, who has had discussions with the European Union about providing police for ESDP missions, said he very much wanted Serbia to participate but budget constraints prevented him from funding the approximately \$5 million that it would cost to send a contingent of 100 officers. He also said that it would be difficult to spare such a large group of police, but Serbia could provide a "small number" of officers, to be incorporated into another country's contingent, if financing could be found. Countryman pointed out that participation did not necessarily mean

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sending such a large number.

¶ 18. (SBU) Zoran Vujic, MFA Assistant Minister for NATO and Defense Affairs, indicated that Serbia was close to reaching agreement with the European Union on the participation of police in certain ESDP missions.

¶ 19. (SBU) Spasojevic emphasized to Countryman that the MOD was dedicated to anti-terrorism work and had made significant gains in building up the capacity of its forces. He nevertheless expressed skepticism that it would be possible to send Serbian military forces to Afghanistan, explaining how difficult it had been to obtain approval for a small medical unit to go to Chad as part of a Norwegian peacekeeping unit. He blamed the MFA in part for not working to gain approval for the deployment. (Note: Deployment of armed forces requires parliamentary approval, whereas the participation of police does not. End note.) Spasojevic said that deploying to Afghanistan would be a hard sell to the Serbian people saying "it would be hard to explain why we send our young people to far flung places to defend others when our own people are endangered in Kosovo."

¶ 10. (SBU) Ratkovic was more bullish on Serbian participation, saying that the result of the VP Biden trip and his own recent consultations in Washington led him to believe that cooperation on military, security and intelligence issues was the best path forward for the U.S.-Serbian bilateral relationship.

#### Attitudes toward the U.S.

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¶ 11. (SBU) In all of his meetings, Countryman expressed concern that frequent statements by Serbian officials criticizing the United States, combined with their absence of acknowledgement of the support we provide Serbia, contributed to widespread negative public opinion. He mentioned a TNS Medium Gallup poll released July 6 in which Serbia and Pakistan shared first place on the list of countries where citizens hold negative opinions of the United States (61%). U.S. cooperation with Serbia in the military, economic, development and other fields was minimized by leaders and the press, while the smaller contributions of Russia were exaggerated, he noted. Countryman urged his interlocutors to take on the responsibility of

explaining the nuances of difficult issues to the public, and to recognize publicly areas of both agreement and disagreement. Dacic did not respond directly, asserting that he understood what was important for relations with the United States and that those relations were important. Jeremic was defensive, arguing that the poll numbers were the result of the "U.S. threat to Serbia's territorial integrity" and that the Serbian government was being as forward-leaning as possible given the difficulties in the bilateral relationship. He asserted that his public rhetoric always matched his private comments. Though Countryman raised this issue twice during his conversation with Ratkovic, the latter avoided responding and gave no explanation for the leadership's reluctance to mention the United States in a positive light.

War Crimes

112. (SBU) Countryman raised the possibility of providing U.S. assistance in the search for ICTY indictee Ratko Mladic, as Vice President Biden had discussed with President Tadic during their May 20 meeting in Belgrade. Ratkovic welcomed the gesture and said the government was looking forward to the assistance. Jeremic indicated that such assistance would be welcome, emphasizing Serbia's firm commitment to completing ICTY cooperation and proceeding with European integration.

113. (SBU) Countryman told Dacic that the Bytyqi case, in which three American brothers were killed in southern Serbia in 1999, was also very important to bilateral relations. He said Dacic could contribute to solving the case by encouraging police officers to come forward in the investigation and ultimately testify in court. Dacic did not respond to the suggestion.

Comment

114. (SBU) The inconsistent messages that PDAS Countryman heard from Ratkovic, Jeremic, and Spasojevic - all members of the same party - are unfortunately characteristic of the government's disjointed approach to foreign policy. Personalities rather than strategy continue to dominate Serbia's political scene with lack of communication among important government players. Though eager to

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engage PDAS Countryman and to express in private Serbian appreciation for U.S. support and assistance, Serbia's political elite apparently still consider public recognition of an emerging productive partnership with the United States to be politically risky with no visible upside. End Comment.

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